

This material is part of a collection that documents the harassment, discrimination, and retaliation perpetrated against Alaska's women research scientists by their supervisor, with full knowledge (and arguably, "tacit approval") of their federal employer, the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS)



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Budget cuts hit Alaska farms and gardens

RESEARCH: Loss of about \$6 million may cost 20 jobs at UAF, Palmer, Kodiak.

By KYLE HOPKINS khopkins@adn.com

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Dennis Fielding raises grasshoppers. Sometimes by the hundreds. Sometimes by the thousands.

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By experimenting on the pests at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the federal researcher is seeking ways to prevent outbreaks that can decimate the crops, such as barley, that fuel Alaska's agricultural food chain.

But by the end of the year, the scientist and his grasshoppers could be gone -- his job erased under cuts proposed to the Agricultural Research Service in President Obama's 2012 spending plan.

The budget, introduced in mid-February, calls for closing the U.S. Department of Agriculture research service laboratory and research unit in Alaska.

That means plucking nearly \$6 million in spending on agriculture from the state, and could result in the loss of roughly 20 jobs in Fairbanks, Palmer and Kodiak, said entomologist Alberto Pantoja.

If funding is not somehow preserved, he said, "we will disappear as an agency in Alaska."

Pantoja worked as the service's lead researcher in Alaska, but left the job Friday to work for the United Nations in Chile, he said.

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The proposed closures are part of \$42 million in nationwide reductions to the Agricultural Research Service under the new spending plan.

Advocates of the agricultural research unit in Alaska say the jobs here are important to:

- Prevent insect outbreaks.
- Promote disease-resistance in potatoes and other crops.
- Catalogue and preserve different varieties of high-value sub-arctic plants such as peonies and rhubarb.

Sen. Mark Begich on Friday sent a letter to Edward Knipling, administrator for the Agriculture Research Service, calling for the department to preserve the efforts in Alaska.

At any given time, Begich argued, a shipping disruption could lead to Alaska food shortages within three to five days. While Alaska will never be able to produce all of its own food, research

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conducted by federal scientists helps it get better at producing and sustaining crops.

"Based on our subarctic climate and unique growing conditions, I would argue Alaska is the state most in need of an (Agricultural Research Service) program," Begich wrote. "However, the current proposed budget cuts would make Alaska the only state not to benefit from an ARS research laboratory."

A spokeswoman for the Agricultural Research Service in Washington, D.C., could not be reached Friday afternoon.

Fielding, the Fairbanks bug expert, said researchers are hopeful that the funding will be restored by the Senate before Congress passes the final 2012 spending plan.

Begich spokeswoman Julie Hasquet said it's unclear whether that will happen.

"As you know, with the federal deficit where it's at, there is an enormous need and pressure to cut across the board," she wrote in response to a question. "So everyone will have to do more with less."

Obama's \$3.7 trillion spending plan for the next fiscal year, starting Oct. 1, is expected to reduce the deficit by \$1.1 trillion over the next decade and includes \$33 billion in domestic cuts, according to reports.

In Alaska, federal agricultural researchers partner with the University of Alaska Fairbanks, funding student jobs and sharing building space and equipment.

"It's quite a blow to UAF and the UA system," said Carol Lewis, dean of the School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Science and director of the Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. "We would lose about \$2 million in projects."

Lewis, who opposes the cuts, said the federal researchers in Kodiak work to reduce the amount of fish waste that ends up in oceans and rivers by converting it to bio-fuel, using it as compost and potentially as fertilizer.

The projected loss of sub-arctic agriculture research also has some Alaska farmers and gardeners concerned.

One problem, said Rita Jo Shultz of Homer, is that the research unit maintains a kind of depository of Alaska plant varieties at the UAF experimental farm in Palmer.

Think of the project as a nature preserve for unique flowers, seeds and crops that farmers may need to bolster business or researchers may want for future study.

Shultz and others are looking for a place to move and preserve peony varieties, maybe in Oregon, so the research isn't lost.

Peonies are a growing cash crop in Alaska, Shultz said. They bloom here July through September -- a time when the flowers are not available elsewhere.

Shultz has sold her crop for \$4 a stem.

"That's why people are getting involved ... For a small amount of property you can have a financial investment that makes sense," she said.

The research conducted by the Alaska subarctic research unit could create more resilient flowers and better soil for growing, said Shultz, who is president of the Kenai Peninsula Peony Growers.

"Right now we're being encouraged by several Japanese buyers to sell to them this year," she said.

Shultz just doesn't have enough flowers to meet the demand.

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JusticeSleeps

We need agricultural research, but that's why we have universities. Let's work together to keep the University of Alaska funded, rather than trying to salvage a government agency where all the woman research scientists either quit or were transferred away. The legacy of ARS's Subarctic Agricultural Research Unit is that only male research scientists remain. Was this really how we wanted our federal dollars to be spent?

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Can we live without this Program....you-bet-ya

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stirthepot

The only time I ever asked the scientists at Palmer about raising blueberries I was told, "I don't know, let us know if you find anything out" It seems that they have specific things they want to do and are not interested in anything else. In Palmer they have a huge area but most of it is dedicated to raising hay. Would make a great golf course. As far as most questions that you might have you can go to the Universities in the lower 48 and they have volumns on about everything and are willing to share and as far as peonies go there are many many articles on the net. Go to any college extension service in the lower 48 and if there is a question about cold weather farming they have it.

9 minutes ago 2 Likes

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eandmtyson

Point Mackenzie Project-The farmland was cleared in the early 80s and nothing came of it, there is a prison farm and a couple of hay fields that get rained on all the time. Agricultural in Alaska was a waste of money and it still is. I am tired of stupid people wasting money that the think isn't theirs.

10 minutes ago 1 Like

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Maichel Boulis

This comment was flagged for review.

17 minutes ago

Like Reply



stirthepot

Idiot

8 minutes ago in reply to Maichel Boulis 1 Like

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CallMeSenator2

Hey, I know! Let's get out of Iraq and Afghanistan and stop Obama's war on Lybians. No bombs! Grasshoppers and peonies!

31 minutes ago 2 Likes

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ENTJ

This is the painful result of letting our government get out of hand. Corrections must now be made.

34 minutes ago

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squidly

"By experimenting on the pests at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the federal researcher is seeking ways to prevent outbreaks that can decimate the crops, such as barley, that fuel Alaska's agricultural food chain."

The only thing raising barley in Alaska has accomplished is bringing welfare checks to farmers in the Delta area. It's a losing proposition. Get rid of subsidies and barley disappears as it should. It has no part in Alaska's agricultural food chain.

42 minutes ago 7 Likes

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